

University of Northern Iowa UNI ScholarWorks

Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Graduate College

2016


Music as a means of connecting, understanding, and being understood

Michael Chase Dickerson

University of Northern Iowa

Copyright ©2016 Michael Chase Dickerson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/etd>

 Part of the [Composition Commons](#), and the [Music Performance Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you

Recommended Citation

Dickerson, Michael Chase, "Music as a means of connecting, understanding, and being understood" (2016). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. 320.

<https://scholarworks.uni.edu/etd/320>

This Open Access Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate College at UNI ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of UNI ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uni.edu.

Copyright by
MICHAEL DICKERSON
2015
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

MUSIC AS A MEANS OF CONNECTING, UNDERSTANDING,
AND BEING UNDERSTOOD

An Abstract of a Recital
Submitted
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Music

Michael Chase Dickerson
University of Northern Iowa
May 2016

This Study by: Michael Dickerson

Entitled: Music as a Means of Connecting, Understanding, and Being Understood

has been approved as meeting the recital requirement for the
Degree of Masters of Music

_____	_____
Date	Dr. Alan Schmitz, Chair, Thesis Committee
_____	_____
Date	Dr. Jonathan Schwabe, Thesis Committee Member
_____	_____
Date	Mr. Chris Merz, Thesis Committee Member
_____	_____
Date	Dr. Kavita R. Dhanwada, Dean, Graduate College

This Recital Performance by: Michael Dickerson

Entitled: Music as a Means of Connecting, Understanding, and Being Understood

Date of Recital: March 7 2016

has been approved as meeting the recital requirement for the

Degree of Masters of Music

_____	_____
Date	Dr. Alan Schmitz, Chair, Thesis Committee
_____	_____
Date	Dr. Jonathan Schwabe, Thesis Committee Member
_____	_____
Date	Mr. Chris Merz, Thesis Committee Member
_____	_____
Date	Dr. Kavita R. Dhanwada, Dean, Graduate College

ABSTRACT

The recital described in this abstract is the result of an active engagement with friends and acquaintances in artistic fields—students and teachers, performers, composers, and audience members, authors, poets, and painters. Some of the pieces included are abstract, in that they are neither programmatic nor texted, but every piece is, in another sense, concrete, because my music is a representation of the creative intelligences of a community, which together produce something real and embodied. My music is intended to be a centerpiece for interaction, a means of connecting with and understanding one another in a way that is perhaps unique to the interplay of sounds.

The music that fills the gaps of my recital, playing while audience members take their seats and again while they exit, is a soundscape for the novel *The Bear and the Nightingale*.¹ The author, Katherine Arden, commissioned me to create something for her readers to listen to while immersed in her book. That posed challenging problems for me as a composer. I wanted my music to correlate meaningfully with the rest of her artistic project; but aligning musical and literary events would have required that all readers progress at the same pace, or that the soundscape progress at a different pace for each reader. Neither of those solutions was workable. So instead of attempting to synchronize these elements, I chose to create a soundscape that would not grab attention, but would predispose a reader to engage deeply with the novel. It has been argued that part of the value of literature is its ability to extend our empathy beyond what each of us could experience directly in our own lives, thereby allowing us to better understand how we

¹ Katherine Arden, *Bear and the Nightingale* (S.I.: Ebury Press, 2016).

think and feel about a wider variety of people and situations. If that is true, my soundscape encourages readers to emotionally invest in a novel that can expand their philosophical horizons.

The first piece of foreground music in my recital is a duo for tenor and bass trombones, requested by Giovanni Scarpetta for a festival he was to play with Sebastián Cifuentes in Argentina. In that piece, I chose to include elements of the tango, because that is the national dance of Argentina. But being a U.S. citizen myself, with no experience in Latin dance forms, I knew that for my music to be authentic, it would have to include some elements of my own native musical tongue. Thus *Blango* is a mix of tango and blues elements, in the mold of a trombone duo. In an effort to understand the tango, I delved into the oeuvre of Astor Piazzolla, the acclaimed twentieth-century Argentinian composer and bandoneon player, who studied with Nadia Boulanger and redefined the ethos of the tango for his generation of Argentinians. A guitarist myself, I was already familiar with the blues improvisations of Jimi Hendrix, who also redefined his genre as well as his instrument, the electric guitar. Although the bandoneon, the guitar, and the trombone are dramatically different instruments, the trombone is so versatile that I did not feel restricted by my given instrumentation. On the contrary, the trombone has long been an important instrument in tango music, has recently been explored by prominent blues performers such as Trombone Shorty, and has many techniques yet to contribute to both genres.

The second number in my recital is a brass quintet called *Rhythmic Gimmick*, written for the 2015 Spanish Brass/Alzira Composition Competition. In crafting this

work, I drew heavily from the album *Rocket Science*, by banjo player, composer, and bandleader Bela Fleck. I did not borrow his melodies or harmonic progressions, but rather his tonal logic: I accomplish modulations by leaving short, thematic melodies unresolved, while allowing supporting chromatic lines to heighten a sense of instability, then rapidly assuming new tonal areas without extensive dominant preparation (Figure 1). These rapid cycles of destabilization and tonal clarity create a drive which, when coupled with perpetual rhythmic activity, propel the listener through the piece.

Figure 1

Concert score, transition from an area of tonal ambiguity to a presentation of the theme in B major.



The third and final work to feature brass on this recital is a *cumbia*—a traditional dance and musical form of several Latin American cultures. My exploration of the genre is loosely based on the Colombian tradition, is titled *Cumbia de un invierno largo* (Cumbia of a Long Winter), and is dedicated to trombonists Giovanni Scarpetta and Sebastián Cifuentes. Scarpetta opens the piece and is soon joined by Cifuentes on the

principal theme group in unaccompanied parallel sixths. Next enters the string bass, doubling the tenor trombone an octave below. The piano enters at the presentation of the second theme, but the drums are not heard until the presentation of the third theme by the trumpet and tenor saxophone, finally grounding the piece in the style of the Colombian *cumbia*. Once all three themes are complete, the trumpet is given the first solo. The use of improvisation moves the piece away from traditional *cumbia* styles into the realm of Latin jazz, as do the modulations and extended tertian harmonies that underlay the solo. The piece remains jazzy until the reentry of the first and second themes in a brassy ‘a capella’ (Figure 2). Following this section is a solo on the tenor trombone, reaching high into its upper register for some flashy filigree before returning to the third theme one last time, with a conclusive *tutti* finish.

Figure 2

‘A capella’ section of *Cumbia de un invierno largo*

The musical score for the 'A capella' section of *Cumbia de un invierno largo* is presented for five staves. The first staff is for Tenor Trombone (Tbn.) in treble clef, starting at measure 142. The second staff is for Baritone Trombone (B. Tbn.) in bass clef. The third staff is for Drums (Dr.) in a simplified notation with 'x' marks for accents. The fourth staff is for Percussion (Perc.) in a simplified notation. The fifth staff is for another Percussion (Perc.) part in a simplified notation. The score consists of five measures, showing a complex interplay between the brass instruments and the percussion.

Thou Art Indeed Just, Lord/When I Am With You breaks sharply with the dance-like quality of the first three pieces. It is a cerebral art for piano and mezzo-soprano. The binary construction of this piece is the result of setting two poems by two writers, who

were both geographically and historically distant from one another. *Thou Art Indeed Just, Lord*,² was written by the nineteenth-century Englishman, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and the second, *When I Am With You*,³ by the thirteenth-century Persian mystic, Rumi.⁴ The two poems are dramatically different in character—Hopkins is verbose, and Rumi is laconic; Hopkins pleading, and Rumi content; Hopkins earnest, Rumi playful. I attempt to capture and contrast the different characters of these poems by setting them according to two different methods. In *Thou Art Indeed Just, Lord*, I correlate vowel sounds and rhymed words with specific pitches in the right and left hands of the piano, respectively. Rather than singing the text, the vocalist recites in a speaking voice, as naturally as possible, while the pianist plays the corresponding pitches. By contrast, I set *When I Am With You* to a joyous melody that adheres to the text through passages of fragmentation.

Next comes *Snow*, for piano, flute, and viola. I have called this piece an art song despite it having no text, because it is strophic and features lyrical melodies—a *lieder ohne worte*. The piece is divided into three equal sections, each repeating a long harmonic progression. In the first, the piano outlines the progression, then the flute enters at the repetition to provide the melodic line. At the third repetition the viola finally enters, working with the flute to provide all the necessary harmonic information, and freeing the pianist to reach inside the instrument for soft, ringing chords. Polyrhythms and unusual timbres hinted at earlier in the piece are explored more fully until the final return to tonic,

² Gerard Manley Hopkins. *Poems*. London: Humphrey Milford, 1918; Bartleby.com, 1999. www.bartleby.com/122/.

³ Jalal al-Din Rumi, *The Essential Rumi*, trans. Coleman Barks (New York: Harper Collins, 1996).

⁴ Special thanks to Coleman Barks who freely gave me permission to use his beautiful translation of Rumi's poem.

at which point each instrument is heard by itself in a comfortable register. Only on the last chord are all three instruments heard together and without extended techniques, bringing resolution to the constantly shifting harmonies and textures that make this piece unique.

Completing the trilogy of art songs is the most traditional so far, a setting of one of my own poems titled *Expectations*. The instrumentation (flute, viola, piano, mezzo-soprano, and double bass) emerged serendipitously from a group of friends and professors interested in new music. As soon as the instrumentation was set, I began creating evolving timbres from combinations of instruments. In most cases, one instrument was used to provide the attack, and two more to provide the decay, sustain, and release.⁵ Certainly, creating new tone colors by combining instruments is not uncommon: what is uncommon is the morphing of one playing technique into another on each of several instruments simultaneously so as to change the color of a single note several times before it is released. With such a small ensemble, this compositional technique dramatically limited my ability to convey harmonic information. I used the piano to complete the harmonies implied by the rest of the ensemble, creating a sparse texture over which the soprano gave a gentle presentation of the lyric. The overall effect is calm and delicate.

Returning to instrumental music, *16 June 2013* is the first piece of solo literature in this recital. Winner of the 2015 Creative Performance Award in Composition at the UNI Graduate Student Symposium, this piece strikes a balance between technical

⁵ See glossary entry 'envelope.'

difficulty and idiomatic writing, harmonic complexity and lyricism. I originally wrote the piece for harp, but the difficulty of that version prevented its inclusion in this recital. A piano arrangement is used in its place. There are several large differences between the two. The exposition is repeated in the piano version to take advantage of the unique resonance of the lower register of that instrument; the repeated notes in the harp version are given shorter note values in the piano version, and the fast diatonic scales in the former are rewritten as chromatic scales in the latter, to accommodate the technical capabilities and handicaps of each instrument; and finally, the piano version is played with more dynamic contrast and faster rhythms. In short, the piano arrangement leaves a different impression on the listeners, but is short of being a new composition.

Moving from solo literature back to duo, *While Walking*, for amplified acoustic guitar and tenor saxophone, is an experiment in extended technique and formal construction. The piece is sectionally symmetrical and close to evenly balanced about the midpoint. An introduction and closing section frame similar interior sections. Each interior section has three parts—one composed theme for each instrument, and one section of improvisation. The enclosing sections are cut from the same cloth: each explores saxophone multiphonics and a non-standard guitar posture to accommodate percussive sounds.⁶ The symmetrical form is articulated by abrupt shifts of tonality, juxtapositions of register, unusual rhythms, and an alternation between through-composed sections and improvisation. Much of the harmonic and melodic material of this

⁶ The guitar is held almost like a cello, with the bottom of the body between the knees, and the neck extending upward and to the left of the player. This allows for easier drumming on different parts of the body of the guitar, and more precise slapping of higher frets.

piece is drawn from just two motives. The first is a piquant succession of two semitones (compounded into minor ninths and/or inverted into major sevenths), and the second is the interval of a minor tenth. The extended techniques, formal symmetry, and unity of thematic material help overcome the chief obstacle to writing any duo—that of varying the texture enough to maintain interest while still crafting a unified piece.

The final piece on this recital is that with the largest number of players.

Sinfonietta for Strings is a three-movement work written for NIYO and conductor John Chiles. Only the first movement is included in this recital. That movement is in sonata form, but has the following abnormalities—the first theme group comprises four melodies, which rather than appearing individually, are repeated and layered on top of one another in a process of additive synthesis. No transitional material is used to move into the second theme group. Instead, a new key area is assumed at the same time that new material is introduced. In keeping with sonata form, the new material contrasts strongly with the first theme group. The first is swung and the second is played in even eighth notes; the first is square, the second is asymmetric; the first features several singable melodies, the second is comprised of numerous melodic fragments; the first is articulated by cadences, the second unfolds without them; the first is upbeat, the second is melancholy; the first does not transition into the second, but the second does transition back into the first. Thus the work of the development is both easy and difficult—easy because themes are easily identified with either the first or second group, but difficult because the contrasting styles of the two theme groups are tough to reconcile.

For the sake of continuity, the development opens in the slower tempo and asymmetric phrase construction of the second theme group, but announces itself clearly with a theme from the first group in the first violins. Gradually the tempo accelerates as the phrases become more regular and as material from both theme groups integrate with one another. The viola is given the final foreground melody of the development, as the texture builds to a half cadence in the original key. The recapitulation opens with the first theme unaccompanied, but that theme is soon joined by the three other themes of the introduction as well as by new material in the bass. The second theme group is taken at the speed of the first, rather than slowing down as before, and the first theme is reintroduced one last time at the speed of the second before an abrupt, conclusive cadence. (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Final cadence of Movement 1 of *Sinfonietta for Strings*

205 Slower, swung Lively pizz.

The musical score is for five string parts (Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violoncello, and Double Bass) in G major. It covers measures 205 to 208. Measure 205 is marked 'Slower, swung' and measure 206 is marked 'Lively'. The score shows a crescendo from piano (*pp*) to forte (*f*). The Violoncello and Double Bass parts have 'arco' markings in measures 205 and 206, and 'pizz.' markings in measure 208. The Violin I and II parts have 'pizz.' markings in measure 208. The Viola part has 'pizz.' markings in measures 207 and 208. The Double Bass part has a 'p' marking in measure 205 and 'pizz.' markings in measures 207 and 208.

Each of these pieces was the result of an interaction with the musicians and artists that surround me. Katherine Arden, the author mentioned above, is a friend of mine from our undergraduate studies at Middlebury College. Giovanni and Sebastián, though not personal friends of mine at the time I wrote *Blango*, have proven, by their trip to Cedar Falls for this very recital, that music can be the basis of a long-distance friendship. *Rhythmic Gimmick*, although an isolated competition piece, has put me in closer contact with the faculty at UNI through my search for musicians who would enjoy performing its premier. *Cumbia de un invierno largo* was written specifically for Giovanni and Sebastián, knowing their enthusiasm for the culture of their native country; *Thou Art Indeed Just, Lord/When I Am With You* gave me the opportunity to connect with the personable and engaging composer Jake Heggie during his residency at UNI; *Snow* and *Expectations* were written with the talents of two friends in mind—Andrea Sanchez (viola) and Natalie Neshyba (flute)—who have both challenged me to become a better performer; *16 June 2013* was written for a harpist and friend in Alaska, and since has put me in contact with no fewer than four other harpists; *While Walking* is a collaboration with an expressive saxophonist, Sean Koga, our mutual friend, an original guitarist, Elvis Phillips, as well as our gifted jazz professor, Chris Merz; and *Sinfonietta for Strings* has allowed me to both give to and receive from my classmate, a conductor of confidence and poise, John Chiles. In all of these pieces, musical ideas and ideas about music have been the focal point for meaningful interactions.

GLOSSARY

A Capella: A term in jazz for a section with a reduced or tacit rhythm section and syncopated rhythmic counterpoint between horn lines.

Bandoneon: An Argentinian type of accordion, which, instead of a keyboard, has buttons producing single notes.⁷

Button: A short, conclusive cadence used to end a piece in a whimsical manner.

Cadence: Any melodic or harmonic progression, which has come to possess a conventional association with the ending of a composition, a section, or a phrase.*

Comping: A term in jazz for the act of providing background material in support of a soloist or other more prominent line.

Cumbia: A folk dance of Colombia, which has evolved into a genre of popular song and dance.

Dominant: The fifth degree of major or minor scales, which normally resolves on the tonic or submediant chord.

Envelope: A term in electronic music for those characteristics of amplitude which determine the growth and decay of a signal, typically described as the attack, decay, sustain, and release.*

Extended Technique: A technique that, although occasionally requested by a composer, is not part of the standard set of techniques expected of every professional instrumentalist.

Fragmentation: The process of breaking material into smaller pieces for individual use and development.

Multiphonic: The production of more than one pitch with a single resonator. This is generally considered an extended technique of melodic instruments.

Polyrhythm: Several different rhythms performed simultaneously, sometimes subdividing a given unit of musical time into non-congruent numbers of beats (e.g. a measure of 5/4 superimposed on a measure of 4/4).

Program music: Instrumental music which tells a story, illustrates literary ideas, or evokes pictorial scenes, as opposed to absolute music, which is not illustrative of any extra-musical content.*

⁷ All definitions marked with an asterisk are adapted from the Oxford Dictionary of Music online. All others are my own.

Register: The part of the compass of an instrument having a distinctive tonal quality.*

Semitone: The smallest interval in European music.*

Sonata form: A type of musical construction (sometimes known as compound binary form) normally used in the first movement of a sonata, symphony, or concerto (and in other types of work). It is used also in other movements. Regular sonata form implies 3 sections:

1. exposition (containing first subject, in tonic key, and 2nd subject, in dominant, and sometimes further subjects), often repeated and followed by

2. development (in which the material of the Exposition is worked out in a kind of free fantasia), and

3. recapitulation (in which the Exposition is repeated, though often with modification, and with the 2nd subject now in the tonic).

The Recapitulation has a coda, a peroration of moderate length though some composers, including Beethoven, extend it into what amounts to a 2nd Development section. The basis of sonata form is key relationships.*

Strophic: A term applied to song, in which the same music is repeated, perhaps with very minor change, for each successive stanza of setting of a poem, in the manner of folk- song.*

Timbre: Tone- color; that which distinguishes the quality of tone of one instrument or singer from another.*

Tonic: The first degree of the major or minor scale. The 'key- note' from which the key takes its name.*

Tutti: A section of music in which the performing ensemble plays as a foreground unit, rather than in sections, or as a background.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Arden, Katherine. *Bear and the Nightingale*. [S.l.]: Ebury Press, 2016.

Hopkins, Gerard Manley. *Poems*. London: Humphrey Milford, 1918; Bartleby.com, 1999.
www.bartleby.com/122/.

Rumi, Jalal al-Din, *The Essential Rumi*. Translated and compiled by Coleman Barks.
New York: Harper Collins, 1995.

Michael Dickerson

A composition recital from the studios of:

Dr. Jon Schwabe

Dr. Alan Schmitz

Mr. Chris Merz

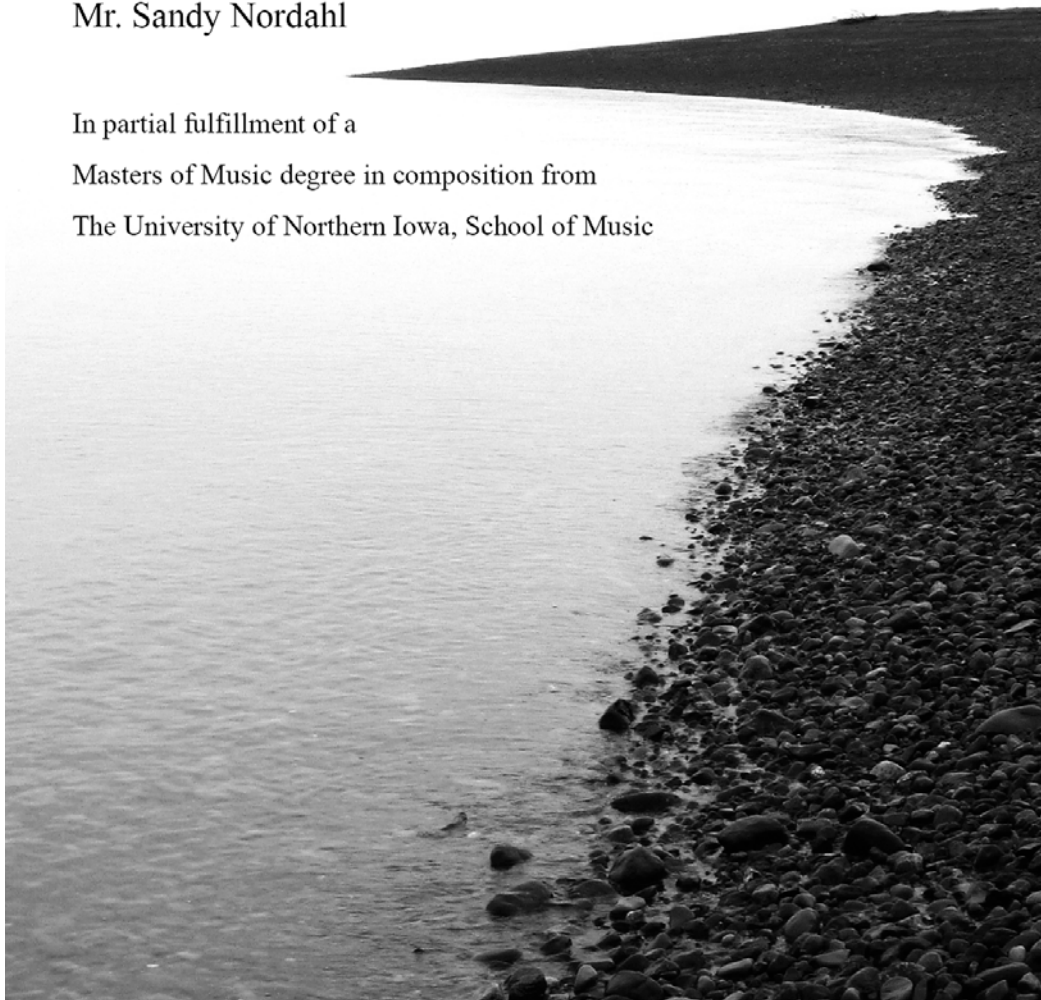
Dr. Bob Washut

Mr. Sandy Nordahl

In partial fulfillment of a

Masters of Music degree in composition from

The University of Northern Iowa, School of Music



Michael Dickerson's musical upbringing began at age six with music theory and blues improvisation, and has since included jazz piano with Dick Forman, classical piano with Sean Botkin, folk and rock guitar with Dave Dribbon, classical composition with Su Lian Tan, Jonathan Schwabe, and Alan Schmitz, jazz composition with Chris Merz and Bob Washut, and electronic composition with Peter Hamlin and Sandy Nordahl.

Graduating with high honors in music and philosophy from Middlebury College in 2012, Michael's musical interests extend beyond traditional compositional considerations to include meta-musical questions of ontology, aesthetics, and semiotics. He is currently combining traditional compositional techniques with the tools of twenty-first-century sound engineering and production in hopes of creating a multi-layered style with broad appeal. Among his most recent commissions are a trombone concerto, for Giovanni Scarpetta, and a double concerto for viola and harp, for Anibal dos Santos and Martha Bonilla with the Bogotá Youth Philharmonic Orchestra.

1. *Blango*, a duo for tenor and bass trombones, was requested and premiered by Giovanni Scarpetta and Sebastián Cifuentes at the 1st International Symposium of the Trombonist's Association of Colombia in October of 2015. Stylistically, this piece is a mix of the blues and the tango, composed by an American musician for an Argentinian audience.

Giovanni Scarpetta—tenor trombone
Sebastián Cifuentes—bass trombone

2. *Rhythmic Gimmick*, a brass quintet, was a semifinalist in the 2015 Spanish Brass/Alzira Festival Composition Competition. This piece draws from the album *Rocket Science* by Bela Fleck in the way musical phrases unfold and juxtapose one another. The title refers to the rhythmic ostinato that propels the texture through modulations and melodic variations.

Dan Meier—trumpet 1
Jordan Boehm—trumpet 2
Ashlyn Christensen—French horn
Giovanni Scarpetta—tenor trombone
Sebastián Cifuentes—bass trombone

3. *Cumbia de un invierno largo* (*Cumbia of a long winter*) is based on a traditional form of Latin music and dance known as the *cumbia*. It will be premiered tonight by its dedicatees, Giovanni Scarpetta and Sebastián Cifuentes.

Giovanni Scarpetta—tenor trombone
Sebastián Cifuentes—bass trombone
Sean Koga—tenor saxophone
Ryan Garmoe—trumpet
Taylor Kobberdahl—piano
Joe Mnayer—double bass
Marshall Egerton—percussion 1
Kyler Boss—percussion 2
Nick Behrends—percussion 3

4. *Thou Art Indeed Just, Lord/When I Am With You* is an art song based on poems by Gerard Manley Hopkins and Rumi. The setting captures the character of the poems and contrasts them sharply in order to better understand each.

Makayla McDonald—voice
Amel Christy—piano

5. *Snow* is a song without words. It unfolds in three sections, each layering new textures and melodies over a single harmonic progression. The title refers to the mood of this piece, evoked by the sight of Middlebury College under a blanket of fresh snow.

Michael Dickerson—piano
Emily Bicknese—flute
Andrea Sanchez—viola

6. *Expectations* is the final art song on this recital. It sets a poem by the composer, and explores the evolving tone colors of single notes shared by multiple instruments.

Makayla McDonald—voice
Emily Bicknese—flute
Andrea Sanchez—viola
Joe Mnayer—double bass
Amel Christy—piano

7. *16 June 2013* was originally a sonata for solo harp. The piano transcription on this evening's recital was the winner of the 2015 University of Northern Iowa Graduate Student Symposium Creative Performance Competition. It is Romantic in style and melancholy in character. The title refers simply to the date on which the composer began work on this piece.

Elisabed Imerlishvili—piano

8. *While Walking* is a duo for tenor saxophone and amplified acoustic guitar. The introduction and closing section explore multiphonics on the saxophone as well as various percussive techniques on the guitar; and the interior sections are structured around improvisation. The title refers to how this piece was written—during a long walk.

Sean Koga—tenor saxophone

Bob Dunn—acoustic guitar

9. *Sinfonietta for Strings* will not be performed this evening, but will be premiered by the Cedar Falls NIYO Orchestra, conducted by John Chiles later this spring. Visit michaelchasedickerson.com for information regarding the date, location, and live web stream.

The Bear and the Nightingale is a soundscape commissioned by author Katherine Arden to accompany her upcoming novel. This piece layers improvised instrumental melodies over *musique concrète* and a computer-generated backdrop. It is designed to be listened to while reading the novel *The Bear and the Nightingale*, and tonight will be played in the background while the audience enters and exits.